



**NORTH DAKOTA**  
DEPARTMENT *of* HEALTH

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## NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:  
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### **State Health Department Alerts Public of Viral Gastroenteritis Season (Commonly Called the “Stomach Flu”)**

BISMARCK, N.D. – Since December 2008, seven outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis, commonly called the stomach flu, have been reported to the North Dakota Department of Health. As a result, the state health department is urging North Dakotans to take precautions to avoid spreading the disease, according to Sarah Weninger, disease surveillance epidemiologist with the Department of Health.

All of the outbreaks have occurred in institutional settings. Counties in which outbreaks have been reported include Barnes, Mountrail, Pembina, Sargent, Stutsman, Ward and Williams.

Viral gastroenteritis (GAS-tro-en-ter-I-tis) is an inflammation of the stomach and intestines and commonly is caused by a group of viruses known as noroviruses. Illness due to norovirus infection is highly contagious and causes nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, fever and body aches. Symptoms usually last between 24 and 48 hours. The elderly, young children and people with weakened immune systems are at highest risk for severe illness and dehydration. There is no medicine to cure norovirus. Most individuals will recover from the infection on their own; however, people who are ill for longer than 48 hours should seek medical attention.

Although often referred to as the “24-hour flu” or “stomach flu,” this illness is ***not*** related to the flu (or influenza), which is a respiratory illness (i.e., fever, cough, sore throat) caused by the influenza virus. Norovirus can spread to people in contaminated food when handled by infected people. The virus can survive on environmental surfaces for several days and also can spread when people touch these surfaces and then touch mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose and mouth.

“The best way to control spread of norovirus is to practice good hygiene,” said Weninger. “People should wash their hands often, stay home if they are sick and clean areas that may be

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contaminated, especially bathrooms. People who are sick should avoid handling and preparing food while they are sick and until 48 hours after diarrhea stops. This is especially important for people who work with food, in child-care facilities or in health-care facilities.”

Norovirus outbreaks commonly occur in institutional settings, such as schools, child-care facilities and nursing homes, as well as in public and semi-public settings, such as banquet halls, cruise ships, dormitories and campgrounds. To avoid spreading the disease, people who are sick should not visit long term care facilities or hospitals, and parents should keep sick children home from school.

For more information about viral gastroenteritis or to report a possible outbreak, contact Sarah Weninger, North Dakota Department of Health, at 800.472.2180.

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